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AUTHOR Shelien, Wesley N.
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ABSTRACT

Because of problems involved in traditional impromptu contests, which require contestants to speak on topics that they know little or nothing about, administrators of the Big Sky Intercollegiate Forensic Tournament at the University of Montana modified the traditional contest structure in 1969 to permit impromptu speeches on sub-topics of general topic areas with which students were intimately familiar. The event was subsequently made a permanent offering of the tournament. This paper describes the structure and procedures for administering the "individualized impromptu" and presents results of self-report questionnaires administered to all contestants following the 1969 and 1976 competitions. Analysis of the results indicated that the majority of contestants received sub-topics appropriate to their general topic areas, that the event appears to foster better speech organization, use of support material, and delivery than does the traditional impromptu contest, and that both the 1969 and 1976 contestants preferred the individualized contest to the traditional one. (GW)

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INDIVIDUALIZED IMPROMPTU:
RATIONALE AND A DIACHRONIC STUDY OF ITS EFFECTIVENESS

Wesley N. Shellen
Assistant Professor of Interpersonal Communication
University of Montana
Missoula, Montana 59812

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Over twenty years ago Sikkink, Cohen, and Richards (1956) argued that analysis should be made on the structure of some of our individual contest speech events.

Notably, "oratory," "extempore speaking" and "Impromptu speaking" could be rigorously redefined. They probably could be vastly improved by some careful and provocative analysis of the rhetorical contribution each of these events makes to the "training by experience" of the student.

The present study is a report of an attempt to reconceptualize the impromptu speaking contest and to test the effectiveness of the modified event at the Big Sky Intercollegiate Forensic Tournament at the University of Montana.

The proposal to restructure the impromptu event was motivated by two criticisms of current practice in impromptu contests: (1) contestants are often unfamiliar with the topic they are given and are thus inherently rewarded for their ability to fabricate content in order to bluff their way through the speech; and (2) the contest event lacks isomorphism with impromptu speech situations within society.

There is nothing unrealistic about impromptu speech per se. Teachers speak impromptu when they answer questions in class, much of the discussion of formal business at meetings requires impromptu speaking by the members, and even normal everyday conversation is essentially a form of impromptu speech.

But none of these normal situations require or encourage a speaker to leap to his feet without preparation and hold forth for six to eight minutes on a topic about which he knows little or nothing. Yet academic impromptu contests almost guarantee that this situation is imposed on at least part of the contestants in every round unless the topics are extremely banal. Such amorphism with reality and the potential for encouraging fabricated speech content to cope with unfamiliar topics is directly at odds with recommendations of the 1974 National Developmental Conference on Forensics (McBath, 1975).

Recognizing these problems on the one hand and on the other recognizing that impromptu speaking could be an important part of the training by experience of the forensic student, the Big Sky Tournament in 1969 adopted a significant modification of the contest structure and offered for the first time an event called "individualized impromptu." The major purpose of the new event was to allow students to present impromptu speeches on topics with which they were intimately familiar. This was accomplished by allowing students to submit a general topic area of their own choice with their entry (with certain restrictions--see rules below) and from that general topic area different subtopics were made up by the tournament staff for each individual round of the contest. It was intended that all of the elements of real impromptu speaking; including adaptation to a variety of different prescribed subtopics, and selection of organization, content, and language of the speech at the

moment of utterance; be preserved in the event without the artificial constraint of a potentially unfamiliar topic area.

The first trial of the new event was evaluated by means of a questionnaire administered to all contestants at the end of the tournament. Based on the data from that questionnaire (reported below), the event was instituted as a permanent offering of the Big Sky Tournament. The questionnaire was again administered last year at the 1976 Big Sky Tournament to provide continuous monitoring of the effectiveness of the established event and to test whether the results of the 1969 survey were replicable and not merely a Hawthorne effect based on response to the novelty of a new event. The following is a more complete description of the event and a presentation of the results of the two questionnaire administrations to allow diachronic comparison of the evaluations of the event by two generations of forensic students.

Structure and Procedures for Administering the Event

The established rules for the event sent out in the tournament invitation are as follows:

Topics will be selected for each contestant from a general topic which he (the contestant) submits for himself. Space is provided on the entry form for each contestant's general idea. This general topic should be one with which the contestant is greatly familiar. For example, if the student is a stamp collector, he may choose "stamp collecting" as his general topic. The event director will select a specific topic drawn from this general topic for each round. The general topic may not be related to this year's or last year's high school or college national debate topic nor

may it be related to the subject matter used by the contestant in any other individual event.

Time: a maximum of eight (8) minutes, including the reading of the topic, will be allowed for each speaker.

Procedure: Upon entrance into the room, the contestant will be handed a specific topic drawn from his general topic. There will be no time for preparation; the contestant will read the topic once to himself and then aloud to the judge. He will then begin speaking immediately.

Upon receipt of the entries from competing schools the hard work of writing three different subtopics (one for each of the three preliminary rounds) based on each contestant's general topic area must be accomplished in a brief period of several days before the tournament. Clearly the large number of individual topics required is the chief drawback of the event. The most efficient method we have found for generating the needed subtopics is to hold a topic brainstorming party among the tournament staff several days prior to the tournament. The topics are then reviewed and revised if necessary, remaining topic areas unfamiliar to the tournament staff are researched, and the resulting subtopics are typed on separate index cards, coded to be distributed to each contestant at the time he is to speak.

An example of how one contestant's general topic area "Shakespeare" was divided into impromptu subtopics is provided below:

General topic area: Shakespeare

Round I: Shylock in the Merchant of Venice: is he a villain to be despised or a sympathetic character with a humane moral lesson?

Round II: Evaluate the following statement: "Most high school students receive their exposure to Shakespeare by reading Julius Caesar. No doubt this choice from Shakespeare's works is a carefully calculated plot to teach American youth to forever loathe the Bard. If English teachers wanted students to like Shakespeare they could have made a much wiser selection."

Round III: Has the age-old conflict ever been resolved about whether Shakespeare really wrote his stuff or whether someone else did it?

Subtopics for the final round of competition are not made up until the finalists are determined.

These procedures for generating subtopics have generally been effective but are not entirely foolproof. Each year it has been necessary to remind topic writers that the subtopics are to be springboards for a speech, not questions for a quiz show. Further, we have to remind them to confine the boundaries of the topic to the area submitted by each contestant. A speaker who is an expert on "Mormonism" may not necessarily be an expert on religion in general, so is it fair to ask the speaker to compare Mormon and Calvinist theology? Another problem we have found is that there is no way to restrict the generality or specificity of the topic areas sent in by the contestants. Topic areas have ranged in specificity from "Philosophy" to "Living Conditions on the Polar Ice Cap." Further, some obscure or technical topics such as "nuclear fusion" require outside help from members of the university faculty to discover meaningful issues for speeches. Occasionally we miss the point of a topic completely which happened the first

year of the event when one student sent us "The Cultural Revolution" as his area. We thought "culture" meant art and music but he wanted to talk about the Chinese Cultural Revolution. In the rare instances where this mistake has occurred we made up a new set of subtopics during the tournament.

Questionnaire Evaluation of the Event

The individualized impromptu event was evaluated by means of a self-report questionnaire given to all contestants following the last preliminary round of competition. As mentioned earlier, the questionnaire was administered in 1969, the first year the event was offered, and again in 1976 to allow comparison of the results after the event had become established. There were 57 respondents to the 1969 survey and 78 respondents to the 1976 survey. Both sets of data are reported below.

At the top of the questionnaire the contestants were informed that its purpose was to gain reliable information about the strengths and weaknesses of the individualized impromptu event. They were asked to fill out the questionnaire as carefully as possible. In bold type they were told "your answers are entirely confidential and have no effect on how well you score in this contest. Your name is not necessary on this form."

The questionnaire was divided into four parts. The first part contained five-point rating scales to assess (1) how well the subtopics related to their general topic area ("topic directly related to my general topic--topic didn't relate to my general topic") and (2) how much the contestants thought they knew about

their general topic area ("I knew a great deal about it--I knew very little about it"). All scales were assigned a score ranging from five points for a mark at the extreme left-hand side of the scale to one point for a mark at the extreme right-hand of the scale. A score of three indicated a neutral response.

The results of the 1969 questionnaire demonstrated high satisfaction with the relevance of the subtopics. Over 85 percent of the contestants checked above the neutral point of the relevance scale and 11 percent checked below the neutral point ($\bar{X}=4.33$; $SD=1.09$; $N=54$). The contestants in 1976 exhibited markedly less satisfaction with the relevance of their subtopics but the majority, 61 percent, still checked above the neutral point on the scale while 30 percent checked below the neutral point ($\bar{X}=3.46$; $SD=1.51$; $N=77$).

In both samples the contestants reported that they were quite knowledgeable about their general topic area. The 1969 survey showed 82 percent of the contestants rated their knowledge of the topic above the neutral point of the scale and 11 percent checked below the neutral point ($\bar{X}=4.14$; $SD=.94$; $N=57$). The 1976 survey showed 87 percent of the ratings above the neutral point and only 3 percent below the neutral point ($\bar{X}=4.53$; $SD=.84$; $N=78$).

The second part of the questionnaire was filled out only by contestants who had previous experience in impromptu speaking contests. The purpose of this section was to obtain self-reports from the contestants asking them to compare their speaking in the

individualized impromptu contest with their speaking in impromptu contests where they are not asked to send in a general topic. Three five-point rating scales were provided for rating their speech organization ("much better organized in this impromptu contest--much better organized in previous impromptu contests"); support material, examples, statistics, etc. ("much more support material in this contest--much more support material in previous impromptu contests"); and delivery ("speeches were better delivered in this contest--delivery was better in previous impromptu contests"). Finally, they were asked to explain the main reason for any improvement they may have noted in their speaking.

In the 1969 survey 69 percent of the contestants rated the organization of their speeches as better in individualized impromptu and 3 percent thought their organization was better in previous impromptu contests ($\bar{X}=4.06$; $SD=.90$; $N=35$). The 1976 questionnaire results showed 58 percent rated their organization better in individualized impromptu and 22 percent rated their organization better in previous impromptu contests ($\bar{X}=3.48$; $SD=1.29$; $N=45$).

The quantity of support material in the 1969 sample was rated higher in individualized impromptu by 78 percent of the contestants and none of the contestants felt they had more support material in previous impromptu contests ($\bar{X}=4.22$; $SD=.80$; $N=36$). In 1976, 73 percent thought they had more support material in individualized impromptu and 18 percent thought they had more content in previous impromptu contests ($\bar{X}=3.82$; $SD=1.22$;

N=44).

The delivery of the speeches was rated as better in individualized impromptu by 58 percent of the 1969 sample while 3 percent rated their delivery as better in previous contests ($\bar{X}=3.94$; $SD=1.05$; $N=36$). In 1976, delivery was rated better in individualized impromptu by 57 percent of the contestants compared to 23 percent who rated their delivery as better in previous impromptu contests ($\bar{X}=3.50$; $SD=1.37$; $N=44$).

The trends of these data suggested that contestants in both samples rated their speech organization, support material, and delivery as better in the individualized impromptu contest than in the traditional impromptu contests. The 1976 sample showed a slight decline in ratings of all three areas compared to the 1969 sample. In both samples the greatest improvement noted by the contestants was in the area of increased support material in the speeches, followed by improvement in organization and delivery.

Of those who noted an improvement in their speaking, an overwhelming majority in both samples (88 percent in 1969 and 75 percent in 1976) cited the ability to speak on their chosen topic area rather than one chosen by the tournament directors as the main reason for their improvement. The other reason cited with any frequency was that previous contests provided experience which helped in the individualized impromptu contest.

The third part of the questionnaire, also filled out only by those with previous experience in traditional impromptu

contests, dealt with the sensitive question of fabrication or bluffing in impromptu speech contests. Two questions were asked; (1)"have you ever bluffed your way through a speech or fabricated information in previous impromptu contests;" and (2) "have you bluffed your way through a speech or fabricated information in any of your speeches in this impromptu contest?" Contestants circled a "yes" or "no" after each question. The data from these questions were tabulated into a four-fold contingency table and analyzed using the McNemar Test for the Significance of Changes (Seigel, 1956).

Both questions were responded to by 35 contestants in the 1969 sample and 45 contestants in the 1976 sample. Of these, 37 percent in 1969 and 38 percent in 1976 reported "no" to both questions, indicating that they had not bluffed or fabricated previously or in the present contest. On the other hand, 23 percent of the 1969 sample and 27 percent of the 1976 sample answered "yes" to both questions meaning they had bluffed or fabricated in both the present contest and in previous impromptu contests. Most important, however, are the trends of those who bluffed or fabricated previously but not in the present contest and vice-versa. In 1969, 37 percent reported that they had bluffed previously but not in the individualized impromptu contest. The 1976 survey showed 27 percent who bluffed or fabricated previously but not in individualized impromptu. Those reporting an opposite shift in behavior, i.e. had not bluffed

or fabricated previously but did so in individualized impromptu, included only 3 percent of the 1969 sample and 9 percent of the 1976 sample. The McNemar test revealed a significant shift toward less bluffing and fabrication in individualized impromptu in 1969 (chi square=8.64; $p < .05$) and a similar but less marked shift in 1976 (chi square=2.71; $p < .10$).

The final portion of the questionnaire provided an overall assessment of the contestants' preferences for either the individualized impromptu contest or the traditional impromptu contest. This took the form of a single five-point scale ranging from "I greatly prefer this contest which allowed me to send in my own general topic area" to "I greatly prefer the regular impromptu contest where I don't have to send in my own general topic area." The results in 1969 indicated 78 percent preferred the individualized impromptu contest versus 17 percent who preferred the traditional impromptu contest ($\bar{X}=4.15$; $SD=1.21$; $N=46$). In 1976, 62 percent preferred individualized impromptu and 19 percent preferred traditional impromptu ($\bar{X}=3.83$; $SD=1.46$; $N=47$). The trends in both samples indicated a strong majority preference for the individualized impromptu method.

Discussion

The data reported herein are admittedly biased since the samples were not random and represented students who had just completed competition in the individualized impromptu contest rather than a traditional impromptu contest. Further, the slight decline in results from 1969 to 1976 probably indicated

that the earlier sample may have been influenced somewhat by the novelty of the event at that time. However, the results of the two surveys are remarkably parallel in most areas and it would be conservative to deny that these results show strong support for the individualized impromptu contest.

The individualized impromptu contest apparently does not eliminate bluffing or fabrication of speech content but it does significantly reduce the incidence of such behaviors. The conditions requiring students to speak on topics they know nothing about are removed at least for the majority who receive subtopics appropriate to their chosen general topic area.

Further, the event appears to foster better speech organization, support material, and delivery; or at least the contestants believe they perform better in these areas in individualized impromptu compared with traditional impromptu. Such self-reports should always be viewed with some suspicion but it does seem axiomatic that people can speak better when they know what they are talking about than if they don't. The fact that both samples indicated their highest ratings of improvement in the area of increased support material lends validity to the self-reports because the objectives of the individualized impromptu contest are most closely linked to the improvement of speech content.

Finally, the questionnaire results indicate that both samples prefer the individualized contest to the traditional contest in impromptu speaking. These results in 1969 caused

us to establish the event as a permanent offering of the Big Sky Tournament. The 1976 data continue to show overwhelming majority preference for the event as compared with its traditional counterpart. Over the years the individualized impromptu contest has grown to become the largest individual event among the five offered at the Big Sky Tournament. The event has been adopted by two other college tournaments in our region, lending some further support for its popularity.

Clearly the key to the success of the event lies in the care given to the construction of the subtopics. The questionnaires for both samples suggest that those students who felt their subtopics were fair and relevant to their general topic area were the ones who expressed the strongest support for the event.

The choice between individualized impromptu and traditional impromptu involves some tradeoffs. In a large tournament like the Big Sky Tournament, this event means we have to create hundreds of impromptu topics rather than the handful required for the traditional impromptu contest. It takes effort to prevent inequities in topic difficulty and interest value when each student has to have a unique topic. The traditional impromptu event can guarantee consistency of topics since everyone can receive the same topic but it cannot guarantee that everyone will find that topic equally difficult. The traditional event allows clear comparison of speakers' treatments of the same topic but the individualized impromptu event puts the emphasis on comparing the contestants' quality of speaking rather than their knowledge

of the topic.

The individualized impromptu event is particularly suitable for small tournaments. In larger tournaments some of the same objectives of individualized impromptu could be satisfied by simply publicizing a restricted topic area for the traditional impromptu contest in the tournament invitation. This practice has already been adopted by a number of tournaments, and it does allow serious contestants to become familiar with the area in advance of the tournament.

On balance, in spite of the fact that ours is a somewhat large tournament for such an event, we like individualized impromptu so we invest the extra effort and time it takes to do the job.

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